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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 002271

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SUBJECT: MALAYSIA'S OIC ROLE FOCUSES ON PRACTICAL MEASURES  
AND REFORM

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 2199 - A MALAY/MUSLIM FOREIGN POLICY

Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASONS 1.4 (B AND D).

Summary

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1. (C) Malaysia's senior diplomat supporting Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's role as Chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Ambassador Ibrahim Abdullah, told us December 1 that Malaysia would continue to focus on "concrete and practical measures" by the OIC to help its poorest members and on reform of the OIC as an institution. Malaysia has funded four OIC development projects in impoverished countries. Ambassador Ibrahim identified Palestine as the core political issue facing the OIC and implied GOM displeasure with Hamas. He also suggested the U.S. apply for OIC observer status. Malaysia has only seven professional diplomats working on OIC matters and anticipates handing over the chairmanship to Senegal in early 2008. Third-country diplomats from Muslim countries tended to describe Malaysia's OIC chairmanship as somewhat helpful, but featuring only modest achievements. These diplomats also downplayed Malaysia's influence among Muslim nations in West Asia. End Summary.

Malaysia Focuses on Practical OIC Measures

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2. (C) Polchief called on Ambassador Ibrahim Abdullah, Under Secretary for the OIC Division in Malaysia's Foreign

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Ministry, on December 1 to discuss Malaysia's ongoing role as OIC chairman. Polchief noted the prominent references to the OIC in Prime Minister Abdullah's speech to the United Malays National Organization (UMNO, Malaysia's dominant political party) general assembly in November (reftel). Polchief also drew Ibrahim's attention to increasing senior-level contacts between the U.S. and the OIC.

3. (C) Ibrahim stated that Malaysia, as chair since 2003, had focused on two broad tracks, namely "concrete and practical measures" to improve conditions in Islamic countries, and institutional reform of the OIC and its Secretariat. Regarding the first track, Prime Minister

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Abdullah Badawi recognized that Islamic countries needed to get their own houses in order, including addressing poverty and strengthening their economies. Internal weaknesses in

Islamic countries translated into political weakness and disunity when facing critical issues, such as those in the Middle East. This led Malaysia to urge the OIC to focus on "practical steps" to strengthen their economies, including aid to poor countries in conjunction with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and fostering of the Islamic Financial Master Plan.

#### Development Projects

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¶4. (SBU) As to its commitment to help poor OIC members, Malaysia had developed projects in four countries, Ibrahim explained: Sierra Leone (palm oil), Bangladesh, Indonesia (business development in Aceh), and Mauritania. In each case Malaysia had involved or worked through the IDB. Ibrahim alluded to longer term Malaysian commercial interests in connection with the palm oil project in Sierra Leone. In response to our question, Ibrahim said he was unaware of OIC economic development projects to assist in Afghanistan or Iraq. Ibrahim discussed Malaysia's initiatives in the context of implementing the OIC's Ten-Year Program of Action.

#### Institutional Reform Needed

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¶5. (C) Ibrahim stated that PM Abdullah recognized the need to reform the OIC as an institution, particularly the Secretariat, in order to make the OIC more effective and

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action-oriented. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, together with former Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, served on the OIC advisory body tasked with drawing up recommendations for needed reforms.

#### Concern for Palestine, Criticism of Hamas

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¶6. (C) Ibrahim noted that resolving the Palestine issue remained the single greatest concern before the OIC. Ibrahim recalled the obstructive behavior of a Hamas official who had tried to usurp the role of lead Palestinian delegate (a designation held by a Fatah representative) in the early August OIC summit in Kuala Lumpur. Ibrahim argued that in order for the international community to "defeat Hamas," countries should not withhold assistance from the Palestinian people; this would have the opposite effect and strengthen Hamas. Accordingly, Malaysia recently provided \$16 million to the Palestinian Authority, but "not to Hamas."

#### U.S. Should Consider OIC Observer Status

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¶7. (C) While discussing increased U.S. contacts with the OIC and the growing Muslim population in the U.S, Ibrahim suggested the U.S. consider joining the OIC as an observer. He noted that Thailand held observer status. Ibrahim expected Malaysia to remain the OIC chair through February 2008, at which time Senegal would be ready to take over this role. Ibrahim explained that his division within the MFA (with a total of seven professional diplomats including Ibrahim) represented the only GOM office to staff the OIC function, although the Foreign Ministry could reach out to other GOM offices for technical assistance on development projects.

#### Perspectives of Muslim World Diplomats

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¶8. (C) Kuala Lumpur-based diplomats from Kuwait, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan, in separate conversations over the past several months, tended to describe Malaysia's OIC chairmanship as somewhat helpful, but featuring only modest

achievements. Kuwait Embassy Counselor Ayman Al-Adsani said Malaysia had done an adequate job as OIC chair. PM Abdullah had focused more on addressing Islamic countries internal problems (poverty, ignorance, extremism) rather than constantly blaming others for the Islamic world's difficulties, but results had been limited. Keep in mind not much can be expected of the OIC chair, Ayman argued, given the weakness of the OIC itself. Both Ayman and Jordanian diplomat Maan Masadeh provided similar first-hand accounts of Malaysia's actions during the August OIC summit to ward off (successfully) an Iranian attempt to insert support for Hizbollah into the OIC's "Putrajaya Statement."

#### Downplaying Malaysia's Influence

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¶9. (C) Maan believed Malaysia valued its OIC chair because, like NAM leadership, it made Malaysia more significant on the international stage. The position also supported Abdullah's domestic political stature. The Muslim diplomats, with the exception of an Afghan, all downplayed Malaysia's influence in the Arab world and with Iran, and all identified trade and investment opportunities as the prime motivating factor in Malaysia's foreign policy, including with Islamic countries. None viewed Abdullah's concept of "Islam Hadari" (civilizational Islam) as having resonance outside Malaysia.

#### Comment

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¶10. (C) Our meeting with Ambassador Ibrahim was devoid of the shrill anti-Israel, anti-West rhetoric that we heard out of the OIC's emergency summit on Lebanon held in Malaysia in August. Ibrahim described modest, largely apolitical goals for Malaysia's continued tenure as chairman; when we tried to draw him out on future political summits, Ibrahim averred there were none planned. Malaysia's focus on economic development in the Muslim world builds on an approach staked out by former Prime Minister Mahathir and reflects Malaysia's own economic achievements. We noted that Ibrahim did not refer to the OIC Secretariat accept to express the need for reform; likewise, we found almost no reference to Malaysia's chairmanship on the OIC Secretariat's website.

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